VS and his Soccer Ramblings

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Foreword

Football was my first love. My first ball was slightly larger than a husked coconut. Rubber, of course. It used to be called 'bata ball', though I haven't been able to find any connection with the footwear giants. It cost one rupee ten paise in those days. When I say 'those days' I mean 'in 1968' when I was six years old. One rupee ten paise was a lot of money then. One could get a working lunch in a moderately priced restaurant for fifty paise (minus fish fry, chicken chops, roasted beef or other such luxuries, of course!). It was possible to travel for five kilometres on a city bus for ten paise. The economics will became clearer if you learn that at that time a newly appointed teacher in a government secondary school drew a monthly salary of about a hundred rupees. A bata ball had an average life span of two weeks at the end of which it would burst or become flattened and unfit for play.

I played football all the time, dawn to dusk, excluding mealtimes (and class times after joining school) breaking an occasional windowpane in the process. Joint family bonds were quite strong and visits and overnight stays at relatives' homes were common. Not expecting to find a ball to play at the host's home, I would carry my ball with me. Most of my bata balls had histories of such foreign jaunts. In the transition from primary to secondary

school the bata balls were upgraded to 'i-cut' balls which consisted of a bladder covered with a thin leather case stitched up with 'i'-shaped strips. You needed a bicycle pump to fill it with air. 'I-cut' balls were at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. 'O-cut' and 't-cut' balls were more durable, the latter being a prized possession. Owning a 't-cut' ball was almost like owning an iPhone today.

It may sound incredible today. But apart from playing football all the time, I used to keep track of what was happening in the football world by sifting through the sports page of the Malayalam daily we used to get at home. That was when I was eight or nine. Which is why I still remember the half-page news with vivid photographs of Brazil defeating Italy 4-1 and becoming permanent keepers of the Jule Rimet Cup in 1970 and of Punjab winning the Santhosh Trophy for the first time in 1971. Perhaps it need not sound so incredible. Reading newspapers is no longer a habit for young children; but today there are very young children who manage to get updated on football or cricket from their parents' mobile phones. I was lucky to have a good valve radio at home. I could tune in effortlessly to the commentary of the final match of the 1978 World Cup in which Argentina became champions for the first time.

There was also a brief period of playing barefoot in the uneven fields which had not seen any kind of cultivation for years, of watching almost all Sevens matches in Kozhikode's northern suburbs. The annual Sait Nagjee Amarsi tournament at the Kozhikode Corporation stadium was also a big attraction. But for a schoolboy with not much of pocket money, choosing the matches to see required a careful analysis of the fixtures and the reputation of the teams. But at least half a dozen matches were squeezed in.

But then came the turning point in my life. Mr. P A Jose who taught Malayalam in the High School classes was largely responsible for it. I began to play less and read more. In the great football days my reading consisted entirely of comics and school stories. There was enough time at night for that. But Jose Sir thought I should change my reading habits. But no radical shift was immediately effected. You don't move from Neo-classical poetry to Romantic poetry all of a sudden. There has to be transitional poetry. In

my case the transitional reading consisted of detective novels. But believe it or not, in two years' time I had read Nalappatt Narayana Menon's Malayalam translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* from cover to cover.

My football-playing days were coming to an end. But I kept track of what was happening in football in the country and abroad. I noted that the stock of both Punjab and Kerala had gone up considerably in the Santhosh Trophy after their championship wins in 1971 and 1973 respectively. Like many other football-watchers I too saw Bengal, which had won the Trophy six times in a row from 1994 to 1999, declining to a second class power in Indian football during the last quarter of a century. I watched on TV both of Maradona's goals in 1986, the 'goal of the century' and 'the-hand-of-God goal', and the heroics of Cameroon four years later. I continued to skim through the sports pages of dailies and leaf through the occasional sports magazine. But there was a general decline in interest after that, briefly revived during the last World Cup when I became a fan of M'bappe's.

The writing of this book is one of those rare accidents. I was given the assignment of translating a book on world football for children. It did not work out. I found the book too amorphous and suggested a drastic rewriting, to which the author was not agreeable. Why not write a new book, I thought. And here it is.

All the information you will find in this book are easily available in cyberspace. In that sense, there is nothing 'original' in the book. I am just a compiler. Vayalil Satheesan the narrator and his young friends are, of course, my creation. Like most books of mine, this is a copy-left book under the Creative Commons scheme. It can be read and downloaded free of cost.

Kozhikode

June 2026

1

It was a cool evening in mid-December. The ideal weather for a game of football. But light would start fading before 6. So they came off the maidan sooner than they would in summer. Ramesh and Faisal walked home in high spirits. The Half-yearly Exams were just a week away. But they were not stressed. Their parents were part of the silent minority that had come to believe that play was as important as studies. So they never missed an evening's football at the sprawling playground across the bridge which would be teeming with boys and men. Some girls too had taken to football recently.

As they turned the bend on the road V S Soccer Museum came into view. It was the village's showpiece. The proud achievement of Ramesh's grandfather Vayalil Satheesan, the last word on football, popularly known by his initials V S. Football buffs never tired of talking to VS. He was not a tiresome old man! He had a ready stock of interesting anecdotes about football. And his museum went on growing. There would always be something new for visitors who returned – a photograph, a painting, a specimen. VS even had a large collection of videos, downloaded and classified meticulously, which he would readily play on the 65 inch TV on the wall of a side-room for anybody who was interested. He also made tea for his visitors, the kind of strong, refreshing tea with an aroma, you had probably never come across elsewhere. Although Ramesh, his grandson and his parents Ramani and Rajeev lived less than half a kilometre away, VS preferred to live alone in the museum with his collections. He slept in the small room at the back which was not meant to be a bedroom.

One of VS's favourite pastimes was to stand at the gates of the museum at dusk and stare at the darkening sky and the birds returning to their nests. So, there he was at the gates as usual as Ramesh and Faisal approached.

"Hi, young men", he greeted Ramesh and Faisal in his booming voice.

"Hi, Muthassa", they returned the greeting in a chorus.

"Care for a cup of tea?"

Who could refuse such an offer! So they pushed open the gates and trooped in.

The museum had completed a glorious decade. But Ramesh and Faisal had only heard of it. They had both lived in the town which was thirty kilometres away. Ramesh's and Faisal's parents, close friends for nearly twenty years, had recently decided together to move to the countryside. More than their new school, which had built up quite a reputation in recent times, the football institute coming up in the next village was the attraction for the boys.

VS pushed open the doors of the museum. "Have a look while I make tea".

Ramesh and Faisal gazed awestruck at the exhibits: portraits of the stars of the game (of bygone eras and the present); photographs of visionary organizers, stadiums and crowds, exciting moments from international matches; specimens of balls used for a century or more; models of mementos and trophies. Faisal quickly recognized the snap of the famous bicycle-kick goal Pele had scored after his retirement from international football, which he had seen in a sports magazine recently. He pointed it out excitedly to Ramesh. But Ramesh was caught up with an equally exciting photo– Lev Yashin the Russian goalkeeper making one of his trademark flying saves.

"Kids, come on out. Let's sit in the yard and have our tea", VS pushed open the door of the museum with one hand as he held the tray with the cups of tea in the other.

Ramesh and Faisal followed VS into the yard – a little reluctantly. The photos had been breathtaking.

They sat on the artistically carved rock-stools on the thin lawn and sipped their tea.

"Ah, here we are", VS launched into one of his anecdotes, of which Ramesh remembered his mother telling him quite a few times. "You have been playing football for at least eight years, assuming that you started playing from age five. Do you know anything about where football originated and how?"

Ramesh and Faisal shook their heads and glanced up expectantly.

"Well, football, like Cricket, began in England as a modern game in the Nineteenth Century", VS paused. "Did you notice that I said 'England', rather than Britain or UK? Well Britain or UK has four distinct regions or provinces, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Football, like Cricket began in England, although today it is played in all the four regions. You will be surprised to know that England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are registered as separate members of FIFA. There is no united team for Britain. I'll tell you more about that later".

VS took a deep breath. There seemed to be a freshness in the twilight air.

"There are some descriptions of villagers playing a kicking game in England as early as the Fourteenth Century. It was much like a religious ritual than a game. Crowds of villagers kicked a ball through the fields. Don't think it was anything like the ball you play with today. It was not a ball at all. They used an inflated pig's bladder. Gradually it developed into a game with two teams playing. But the number of players was much more than eleven on each side. A team was in fact a large mob. The idea was to take the ball by any means to what we today call the goal. It would be some spot marked on a vast field. The two goals would sometimes be miles apart! It was a rough game. Sometimes people got badly injured. There were no referees to show a yellow or red card. Such games were played in other European countries like France too. Probably China has the longest history of a game resembling modern football. It is believed that such a game existed in China as far back as the first century of the Common Era. The Chinese called the game Zuquiu, which is an exact literal translation of

football, 'zu' for 'foot' and 'quiu' for 'ball'. It continues to be the word for football in modern Chinese.

"Football in its modern form was certainly born in England. In the second half of the Nineteenth Century. You will be surprised to learn that in the early days of the game handling the ball was perfectly all right. Today, in the version of football that we play, it is not allowed. In Rugby and American Football, the players can carry the ball. They can also kick it, of course. Our form of football is also known as soccer to distinguish it from the other two forms which also evolved during the Nineteenth Century. It is also known in England as Association Football. The formation of the Football Association in 1863 can be taken as the point of origin of modern football. The Association was the first official body to set up rules for the game. It excluded rugby from its consideration completely. The FA Cup, the first football tournament in history was launched in 1871. Clubs from all over England participated in it. A Century and a half later, it is still one of the important club tournaments in the world. The British Home Tournament in which the different provinces of the country, England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland participated began in 1884. It was conducted annually till 1984, after which it was discontinued."

VS paused. He suddenly got up with a start. “Oh, I am sorry. It’s pretty late. Your parents must be worried about you. I’ll tell you more about the story of football next time we meet. Good night!”

“Good night, Muthassa!”

2

V S had not been keeping well. A viral fever had kept him down for nearly a week. He was convalescing now. He stayed indoors to keep away from the mild December chill. Ramesh and Faisal found him relaxing on a sofa without switching on the lights, reading a book in the light that came in through an open window. It was a little after Four in the evening.

"Hello, young men!" VS greeted them as usual.

"Hello, Muthassa. Are you Ok?"

"Fit as a fiddle, as they say", VS beamed at them. But they thought his voice sounded a little weak.

"All right, let us get on with our story of football".

VS straightened his posture a little, placed the book he was reading on a small teapoy and turned to them.

"Where were we? Ah, yes, the FA and early football in England. Before the end of the Nineteenth Century a number of clubs sprang up in England. Matches between clubs became common. Football became a popular game. Now, wait a minute. Here is something interesting. There was another game the English had invented – Cricket. It also developed into a full-fledged game in the Nineteenth Century. But cricket was not the kind of popular game it is today. In those days it was known as a gentleman's game. Football was a people's game right from the beginning. Football matches drew large crowds. Another interesting thing is that football developed into a winter's game in England, while cricket became a summer game. Do you know why?"

Ramesh and Faisal stared blankly at VS.

"You should pep up your geography", VS grinned. "In England days are about 16 hours long in mid-summer and less than eight hours long in

mid-winter. Cricket is a game that is played for seven hours, if you include the lunch and tea breaks. You need good sunlight for the game. There were no floodlights in those days. Football is a game of ninety minutes. If you start early in the afternoon you get enough light for the whole match. Cricket is a slow, leisurely game. You can manage to play six hours without being tired out. Football is a faster game. You need good stamina to last out for ninety minutes. Even the goalkeeper will be strained in the face of continuous attacks by the opposing team. In England mid-day temperatures are often less than 8 degrees in winter. A good game of football warms you up. Of course you have to take a break when there is heavy snowfall. You can skate or make a snowman, but not play football. Other than England, only a handful of countries which adopted football have turned it into a winter game.

"Football soon spread to other European countries. France had football clubs as early as 1872. Soon football became established in countries like Spain, Germany, Italy and Austria. By the beginning of the Twentieth Century football had become popular in almost every country in Europe. Meanwhile, football was taking roots in another part of the world – Latin America. Perhaps nobody could have hazarded a guess then that countries like Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Colombia would go on to write some of the brilliant chapters in football's history for the next century and more. Football came to all these countries through British influence. Britain had established the largest colonial empire in the world. British workers, technicians, traders and armed forces took football to these countries.

"The English took football to their colonies too. As Bengal was Britain's first colonial possession in India, football first became popular in Kolkotta. Mohan Bagan, one of India's most powerful club teams was established in Kolkotta in 1889. Bengal maintained its supremacy in Indian domestic football for a long time. It still has one of the strongest state teams in the country. Football also became popular in other parts of the country under British rule, like Malabar in Kerala. Durand Cup, India's oldest club football tournament, named after Henry Mortimer Durand, British Indian Government's foreign secretary, was started in 1888.

Ramesh and Faisal noticed VS's voice was trailing off. It was only his passion for football that had enabled him to speak for so long.

"Are you ok, Muthassa?"

"Perfect. A little tired, perhaps", VS took a long breath. "Shall we call it a day? But just wait till I tell you all about how football became the most popular game in the world. So, good-bye for now".

"Good-bye, Muthassa".

3

"Football is big business today. Ticket sales make up only a very small part of the money earned. Clubs have corporate companies as sponsors and buy star players for millions of dollars. Television channels earn billions through telecast and advertisement rights", VS sounded very excited, as if he was describing the story of a thriller movie! Ramesh and Faisal sat glued to their chairs, their eyes riveted on VS's face.

"Things were very different when football emerged as a popular game at the end of the Nineteenth Century. There were some matches between clubs that attracted a few thousand spectators. But entry for spectators was largely free. There was no big money in the game. After football was introduced in most European and Latin American countries, clubs showed interest in going abroad to play 'friendly' international matches. They could be described as 'friendly' because they were not official matches, not part of a regular international organization's approved fixture. Within Britain there were regular matches involving clubs from England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. There were no national teams as we have today. The match between English and Scottish 'national' teams in Glasgow, the capital of Scotland, in 1872 is sometimes called the first international match. That is all right because Scotland and England have been fielding separate national teams from the early days of international football. Although football was played in France and other countries, there was no international body for football to codify the rules of the game till the beginning of the Twentieth Century. The rules of the English FA were largely accepted.

INTERNATIONAL
FOOT-BALL MATCH,
(Association Rules,)
ENGLAND v. SCOTLAND,
WEST OF SCOTLAND CRICKET GROUND,
Hamilton Crescent, Partick,
SATURDAY, 30th November, 1872, at 2 p.m.
ADMISSION—ONE SHILLING.

"The Olympic Games played an important role in making football a truly international game. In the first modern Olympics in held in Athens in 1896, there were only a few exhibition matches for football. In the 1900 Paris Olympics matches were held between three club teams, two French and one English. No medals were awarded. In the 1904 Olympics held at St. Louis in the USA too, only three club teams participated, two from USA and one from Canada. Medals were awarded for the first time. Galt FC from Canada won the gold medal and Christian Brothers College from USA won the silver.

"FIFA, the first international governing body for football was formed in 1904. FIFA is short for Federation Internationale de Football Association". VS pronounced the name in French and laughed. "Quite a tongue-twister! FIFA managed to bring together several national football associations under it. Over the next few years it succeeded in standardizing the game and making rules for the game acceptable to all its member countries. FIFA's influence was seen in the next Olympics held at London in 1908. From this Olympics FIFA was given the responsibility of organizing the football matches. For the first time national teams participated in football, although there were two teams from France. The other teams were Britain, Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden. Britain ended up champions and Netherlands runners-up. In the 1912 Olympics the number of competing countries increased to eleven. Britain retained its gold medal and Denmark came second".

"You must have noticed that in Olympics so far, football had been an all-European affair. But in the 1920 Olympics held in Antwerp, Belgium, a non-European team, Egypt from Africa, participated for the first time. Hosts Belgium won the gold medal and Spain the silver.

The Egyptian team (the first from outside Europe) for the 1920 Olympic football tournament

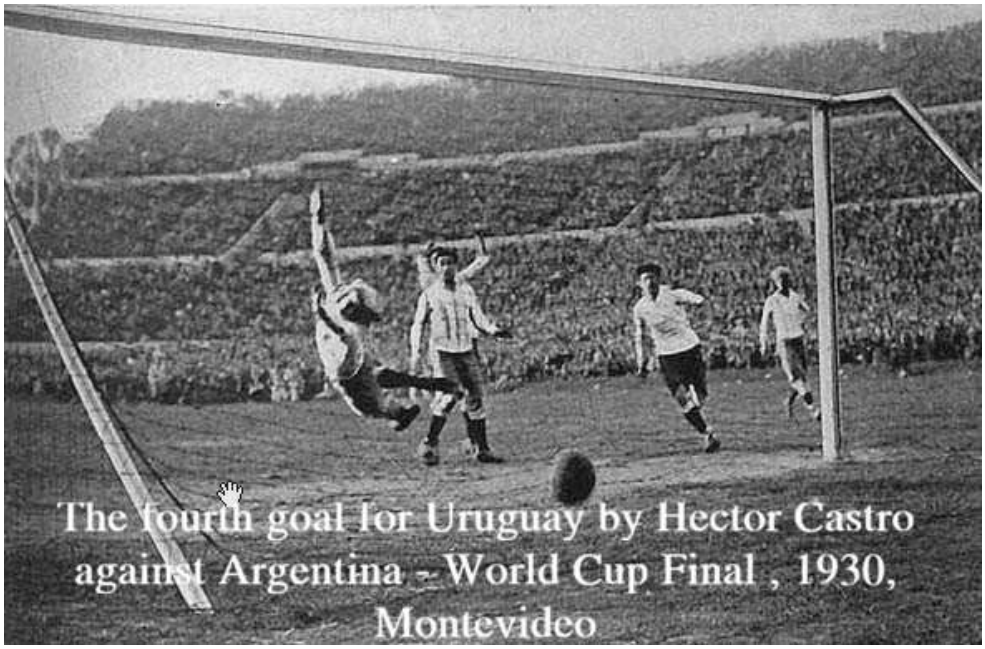
"The 1924 Olympics held in Paris for the first time saw a football competition becoming truly international. There were teams from four continents. Besides 19 teams from Europe, there was Uruguay from South America, USA from North America and Egypt from Africa. Uruguay's victory in the finals over Switzerland was the beginning of the South American teams' great victories over European teams that were to come for the next hundred years. In the 1928 Olympics at Amsterdam, Netherlands, the number of teams came down to 17. But South and North Americas increased their representation. Besides Uruguay, Argentina and Chile arrived from South America. From North America, USA was accompanied by its neighbor Mexico. Egypt was able to make it too. The finals turned out to be an all-South American affair. Uruguay won the gold, and Argentina the silver. Uruguay's victories in 1924 and 1928 gave a taste of what the country was to do in football in the next three decades and more. Egypt's coming fourth behind Italy went mostly unnoticed. This remained the best performance of an African team in international football for a long time. You must have seen packed galleries for world cup matches on TV. The number of spectators can go as high as fifty thousand or more. But the Olympics football crowds in those days often numbered less than five thousand.

"The idea of organizing a world football tournament outside the Olympic games had been in the air for some time. Jules Rimet who was elected president of FIFA in 1921 played an important role in the discussions. Finally when it was decided to conduct the first official world football championship in 1930, it was no surprise that Uruguay, the rising star of world football, was selected to host it. The cup for the winners was named after the FIFA president Jules Rimet. Uruguay, which was celebrating the centenary of its independence, offered to meet the travelling expenses and lodging costs of all the participating teams.

"Unfortunately the first World Cup turned out to be something of a disappointment. Because of the economic crisis caused by what came to be called the Great Depression, major European teams like England, Italy, Germany and Netherlands could not participate. Only four European teams could make it: France, Belgium, Yugoslavia and Romania. South America had the largest contingent: besides the hosts Uruguay, there were Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Peru. The other two teams were USA and Mexico. There was no representation for Africa or Asia.

"There were no qualifying matches for entry. Any team that wished to participate could join. Yet the final line-up was just thirteen teams. The teams were divided into four groups. After the round-robin matches one team from each group advanced to the semifinals. The finals was played between Uruguay and Argentina. Uruguay continued its winning streak in international football by beating Argentina 4-2 and became the first winners

of the Jules Rime Cup. The finals was played before a record crowd of 90,000 at the newly built stadium in Uruguay's capital, Montevideo. USA secured the third place and Yugoslavia the fourth.



VS paused and beamed at Ramesh and Faisal

"With this we come to the end of the first episode in the history of the World Cup", VS gave a good imitation of a TV anchor. "We will be back with the next episode in a few days from now. Until then, goodbye".

4

The friendly match with the school team from the city had been called off due to death of a former principal of the school. Ramesh and Faisal were dejected. Ramesh was a good defender and Faisal was known for his powerful shots at the goal. Although it was just half past four there was a slight chill in the air. They were more than glad to push open the gates of the museum for a chat with VS.

"Hi, boys. You don't look too happy. What happened to your mother of all matches?" VS knew about the age-old rivalry with the city school team.

"Postponed. Mr. Rashid, our former principal is dead".

"Oh, I didn't know", VS was thoughtful for a moment. "Rashid was a good friend of mine. He used to be a frequent visitor here till he retired and shifted with his family to Kannur".

"Come in and be comfortable", VS said after a moment. "It's little colder than usual today.

"Well, the launching of the FIFA Cup was a landmark event in world football in many ways", VS began, leaning back leisurely on his armchair. "Now there were two major international competitions for football: the FIFA Cup and the Olympics, two years apart from each other. If we look at both very closely we shall see that the pattern of performances by teams in them were slightly different. Only amateur players were allowed to participate in the Olympics. Many national teams that participated in the Olympics did not represent the full strength of the country. FIFA wanted professional players to be allowed to participate in the Olympics football championship. Because of the difference of opinion in this matter between FIFA and the Olympics Football Committee, football was scrapped from the 1932 Olympics.

"The economics and politics of the world were to affect the Olympics football competition too. As I told you there was a world-wide economic crisis between the years 1929 and 1933. Industrial production was slowing down, unemployment was rising. We already saw that many nations could not afford to send their teams for the 1930 World Cup. Hosts Uruguay generously took care of the boarding and lodging expenses of the teams that participated. European politics was changing as never before. Benito Mussolini, the dictator had come to power in Italy in 1922. When FIFA chose Italy to host the World Cup in 1934, Mussolini made it a prestige issue for Italy. He badly wanted Italy to win the World Cup and organized hectic schedules of practice for the Italian national team.

"For the first time teams had to qualify to participate in the tournament. Even the hosts had to qualify. Thirty two teams applied to participate. The number of participants was fixed at sixteen. FIFA gave 12 slots for Europe, three to the Americas, and one to Asia or Africa. Uruguay the champions refused to participate in protest against some of the top teams refusing to participate in the cup they hosted and won in 1930. Teams from Britain also refused to participate. Finally 16 teams emerged after the qualifying matches: Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland from Europe; Argentina, USA and Brazil from the Americas, and Egypt from Africa. The practice of seeding, or identifying more talented teams began from this first edition of the World Cup. The seeded teams or teams which were judged to be more skilled were carefully spread out in different groups so that they were not eliminated in the first rounds. But there have been several instances in various editions of the World Cup when unseeded teams defeated, or even eliminated seeded teams. Unlike in 1930, there was no round robin round. The winner of each match advanced to the next round. The defeated team was knocked out.

"Italy's win over Czechoslovakia in the final was almost expected. The home crowd would have accepted nothing less! But there was another interesting sidelight to this edition of the World Cup. The third-place game, or the losers' semifinal was introduced. Germany's edging past Austria to

the third place probably did not attract much attention. But in twenty years' time West Germany was to win the World Cup and become one of the greatest soccer nations in the world.

"The Nazis under Hitler had come to power in Germany in 1933. The 1936 Olympics in Berlin turned out to be an exhibition of the Nazis' organizational skills. The party's own filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's film *Olympia* recorded the pomp and glory of the Berlin Olympics. This Olympics saw Asia getting a fair representation, with two teams, Japan and China participating. But South America was badly under-represented. Only Peru sent a team. Without Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil the championship lost much of its shine. Italy repeated its performance in the 1934 World Cup, beating Austria to become winners. This was Italy's first Olympic football title. Norway, a dark horse, came third, beating Poland in the losers' semifinal to win the bronze medal.

"The 1938 edition of the World Cup held in France was probably the most badly participated in its history. It was held in the shadows of the Second World War. Political tensions were rising in Europe and other parts of the world. The hosts France and the champions Italy qualified automatically. Eleven slots were given to Europe, two to the Americas and one to Asia. Indonesia, which was then called the Dutch East Indies became the first Asian team to participate in the World Cup. Cuba and Brazil represented the Americas. The teams from Europe, other than the hosts and the champions, were Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Rumania, Sweden and Switzerland. Austria withdrew before the matches began due to political reasons. Major teams like Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay and the USA had withdrawn from the qualifying rounds for various reasons. The knockout format of 1934 was retained. Italy continued its winning streak beating Hungary in the final to become champions. Brazil showed its promise beating Sweden for the third place.

“There was no World Cup or Olympics for the next ten years. The World was plunged into a disastrous war in which tens of millions of people lost their lives and many more were made to suffer from hunger and disease. There was no time or peace for playing games.

VS stopped. Ramesh and Faisal saw him grimacing. Neither VS nor they were alive when it happened. But they could very well imagine the state the world was in then.

5

It was an interesting coincidence. It was on Independence Day that Ramesh and Faisal learned about independent India's first entry into international football.

VS was watching Independence Day celebrations in Delhi on the TV.

"Good morning, boys" VS greeted them as they came in. "The ideal day for a quiz. The question is, when did India first participate in an international football championship? Come on, quick".

But Ramesh and Faisal shook their heads.

"Point to the quiz master! It was in the London Olympics of 1948, less than a year after India became independent. The Indian team made history by playing barefoot. India lost to France 1-2 in the first round and were eliminated. For the first time there were as many as three Asian countries participating. Besides India, there was China and South Korea. Africa was represented by Egypt. Mexico and USA represented North America. But none of the famed South American teams, Argentina, Brazil or Uruguay participated. Champions Italy lost to Denmark in the quarter finals. Sweden became Olympic Football champions for the first and last time beating Yugoslavia who also registered their best performance in the Olympics. Denmark defeated Britain for the bronze medal. One can't think of the World Cup without it appearing on television screens today. It was in this Olympics that live telecasting of matches started.

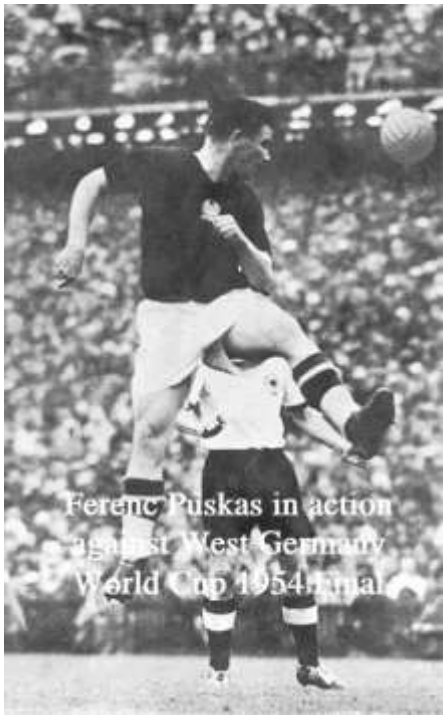
"The revival of the World Cup after twelve barren years in 1950 was not very encouraging. The level of participation was disappointingly low. Many teams including India withdrew after qualification. The major reason for the withdrawal was the expenses for the teams' travel. The War had ruined the economies of most nations of the world. In the end there were only thirteen teams, five from South America, including the hosts Brazil, two from North and Central America and the Caribbean taken together , Mexico and USA , and six from Europe, England, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Yugoslavia. Uruguay regained the title it had won in 1930. To increase the number of matches and boost ticket collection, the knockout format was discarded at all stages. The teams were divided into four groups. Round robin matches in the groups would throw up a winner each from the groups. The four teams were then to play in round robin format to decide the winners.

"In the second round robin round, which consisted of Uruguay, Brazil, Sweden and Spain, the last round robin match was between Brazil and Uruguay. Brazil was at the top of the group with 4 points and Uruguay second with three points. Brazil needed only a draw to become champions, while Uruguay had to win the match. The result of this crucial match was stunning. Brazil lost to Uruguay 1-2. The defeat before the home crowd was a big disappointment for Brazil. But, as we shall see, Brazil would be making a big-come back in eight years' time. Sweden, the Olympics champion came third, when they beat Spain 3-1 and gained 2 points. The all-south-American final marked the rise of South America as soccer's most important continent.

"The Helsinki Olympics of 1952 saw a large contingent of nations participating, twenty five in all. 1950 Champions Uruguay did not make it. Brazil and Chile were the only teams from South America and USA from North America. India represented Asia and Egypt, Africa. Europe registered a heavy presence with nineteen teams. Most notable was the participation of five countries from Eastern Europe, including the 1938 World Cup runners up Hungary. The Hungarians, who became famous as 'magical Magyars' for their attractive style of play, led by Ferenc Puskas, one of the greatest players of the game in history, won the final against Yugoslavia convincingly. This was Hungary's first international championship win in the history of the game. Sweden came third beating West Germany in the losers' semifinal. After the War Germany had been divided into East and West Germany.

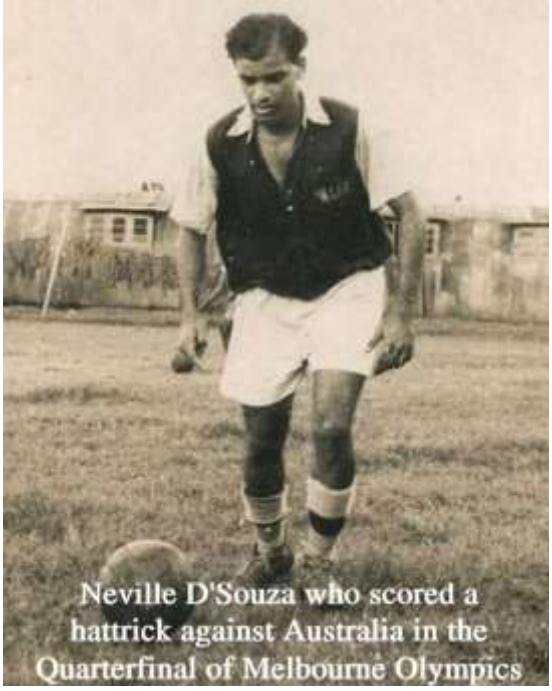
"The 1954 edition of the Jules Rimet Cup was hosted by Switzerland. There were 16 teams who qualified, two teams from South America, one each from Asia and one from North-Central America and Caribbean taken together. The champions Uruguay and the hosts Switzerland qualified by default. If you know your geography, you'll know that Turkey is both an Asian and a European country. The major part of it is in Asia, but there is a small part, which includes the famous city Istanbul, located in Europe. Turkey had been included in the European group. But this time the country was allowed to take part in the qualifying rounds from Asia. But it was South Korea that qualified. Japan had been banned from participating. This

world cup saw the rise of a new power in football, West Germany. West Germany defeated Olympics champions Hungary to win the cup. Reigning champions Uruguay were pushed to fourth place behind Austria.



"Two years later, the Melbourne Olympics of 1956 saw a miserable participation in football. There were no teams from South America. Interestingly of the eleven teams which finally arrived, four were from Asia: India, Indonesia, Japan and Thailand. East and West Germany participated as a united German team. Soviet Union which had been highly rated from the beginning went on to win the gold medal beating Yugoslavia in the final. Soviet Union, perhaps, owed its achievement chiefly to the legendary goalkeeper Lev Yashin who became the greatest goalkeeper in history with a record number of 150 penalty saves in international football. Yashin went on to play in three world cups, 1958. 1962 and 1966, for his country. This was a memorable Olympics outing for the Indian team which defeated Australia 4-2 in the quarterfinals. India's Neville D'Souza who scored a hat trick became the first Asian to score a hat trick at the Olympics. India lost to Yugoslavia in the semifinal and to the Bulgaria in the losers' semifinal. But it was India's best performance ever in International football. You must have noticed that all the three medalists were East European countries. Yes, East

Europe, or the Socialist Bloc, as it came to be called, was moving ahead in sports and games after the II World War.


Neville D'Souza who scored a hattrick against Australia in the Quarterfinal of Melbourne Olympics

VS paused and took a deep breath. "But the story of football is not just about the Olympics and the World Cup. There are many more interesting events to look at. Ah, yes, tomorrow is a holiday too. Shall we go for another football yarn tomorrow? "

Ramesh and Faisal nodded their heads and got up to go home. It was always exciting to listen to VS's football lore.

6

VS had just finished munching his meagre breakfast, four small sugarless biscuits, and was washing it down with a glass of water when Ramesh and Faisal pushed open the front door and went in.

"Good morning, young men. Care for some biscuits?" VS pointed to the small tin of biscuits.

"No, thank you, Muthassa". Faisal and Ramesh said in a chorus, "We just had breakfast".

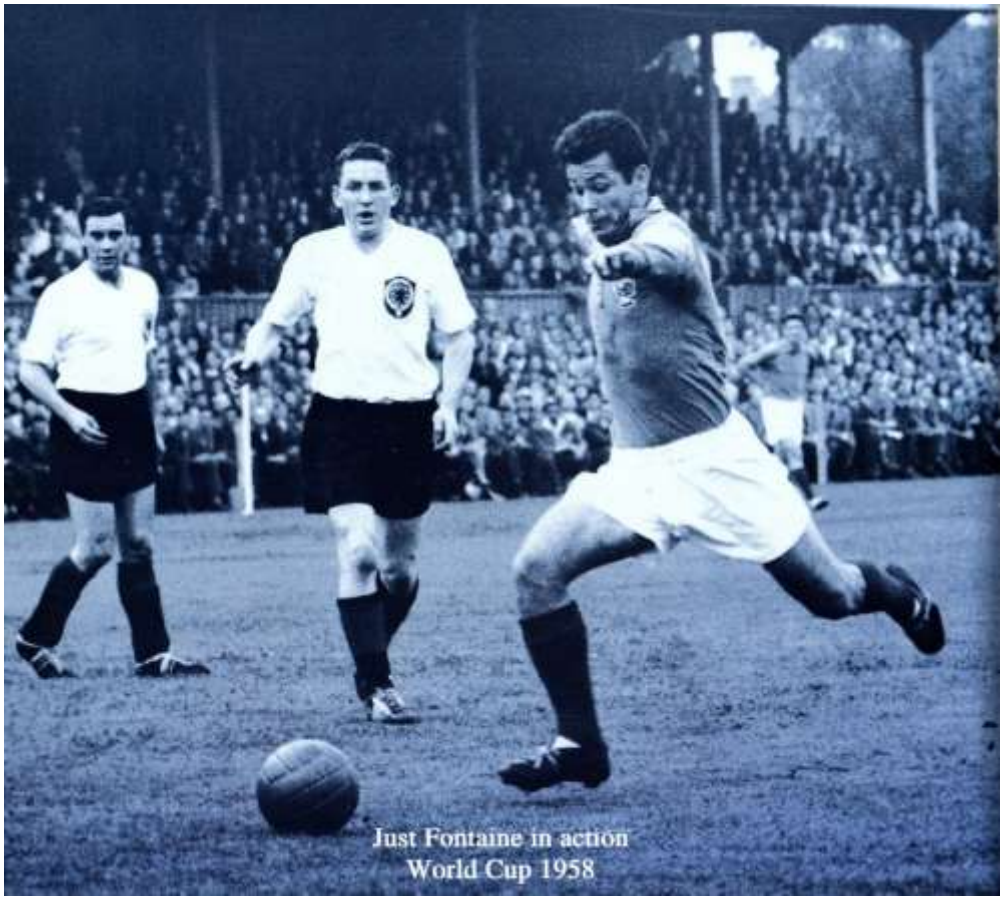
"All right", VS washed down the last crumbs of biscuit in his mouth.

"Let me begin with the beginning of one of the greatest ages in international football. The World Cup of 1958 hosted by Sweden. Champions in the 1948 Olympics and coming third in the 1950 World Cup and the 1952 Olympics, Sweden deserved to host the 1958 edition. Before I go into what happened let me tell you why this World Cup was one of the most remarkable ones. It was the first world cup in which all the four provinces of Britain with their separate membership in FIFA qualified: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This was also the world cup in which the rule of goal average was introduced. Till then if two teams got the same number of points in a round robin round qualification to the next round was decided through a playoff match. The team which won the match would qualify. Instead, it was now decided to allow the team with the better goal average to qualify. Calculating goal average is quite systematic today. It is the difference between the goals scored and goals yielded by a team. Suppose a team scores 5 goals in the round robin round and yields 3 goals. Its goal average would be 2. If the other team with the same points has a goal average of only 1, the first team would qualify. If both teams have the same goal average, the qualification would be decided by draw of lots. But when the goal average rule was introduced in 1958 it was not so clear-cut. The goal scored would be taken first. The team that

scored the most number of goals would qualify. If the goals scored was the same, the team that let in the least number of goals would qualify.

"This World Cup saw the rise of one of the greatest players in the history of the game. You won't recognize him if I tell you his full name: Edson Arantes do Nascimento. But don't worry. We all know him by his nickname: Pele! Pele was only 17 when he played for Brazil for the first time in this World Cup. There were sixteen teams this time. The champions West Germany and the hosts Sweden qualified automatically. Ten other teams qualified from Europe. Among them were the 1956 Olympics champions Russia who were qualifying for the World Cup for the first time. Mexico qualified from North America and Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay from South America. Asia and Africa went unrepresented. Great performances by Pele, Garrincha, Vava and others ensured Brazil's advance to the final. Brazil defeated Sweden 5-2 to become champions for the first time. West Germany the champions were eliminated in the semifinal, losing to Sweden. They also lost to France in the losers' semifinal and had to be content with the fourth place. Just Fontaine of France became the top scorer in the tournament with 13 goals. His record is still unbroken. He didn't get the golden boot award then, of course. That was first given in the 1982 World Cup. He got his due after FIFA decided to give the award retrospectively later.

Pele strikes
World Cup 1958


Just Fontaine in action
World Cup 1958

"The 1960 Olympics in Rome saw Yugoslavia improving upon its 1952 performance by winning the gold medal. Denmark won the silver and Hungary the bronze. This was India's last participation in Olympics football. It was eliminated in the first round losing to Hungary and Peru, and getting just a single point from a draw with France. India has never qualified to play in the Olympics since then. The next World Cup in Chile in 1962 saw Brazil repeating its performance in 1958. Czechoslovakia were runners up, for the second time in the history of the World Cup. Chile finished third, edging out Yugoslavia. Besides the hosts Chile and the Champions Brazil, South America was represented by three other teams, Argentina, Colombia and Uruguay. There were ten teams from Europe and Mexico from North America. Both Asia and Africa went unrepresented. This World Cup was unfortunately noted for violence on the ground and defensive play which bored spectators. The average number of goals scored was the lowest so far: just 2.78. Both violence and defensive play became

more common after this world cup, especially defensive play. Teams preferred to play safe than take risks by playing an attacking game.

"The football component of the 1964 Olympics hosted by Japan looked quite skewed, I would say. There were only five teams from Europe. Asia, Africa and South and North America together sent nine teams. Hungary won its second Olympics title with Czechoslovakia winning the silver and East Germany taking the bronze. The performance of Egypt was remarkable. It secured the fourth position, repeating its performance in the 1928 Olympics. There is something interesting about Czechoslovakia's performance in international football. The country never became champions, either in the World Cup or in the Olympics. But it became runners up twice in the World Cup and once in the Olympics. Unfortunately it never came up with a notable performance in international football after the 1964 Olympics.

"The 1966 World Cup which England hosted had many interesting sidelights. It was the first time that the World Cup was held in the land of modern football's origin. It was the first World Cup that was boycotted by an entire continent. African teams boycotted the qualifying round protesting against the new regulation that did not allow African countries to qualify directly. Champions Brazil were eliminated in the first round. North Korea's performance against Portugal in a quarter final match was spectacular – the best so far by any Asian country. They led 3-0 before losing

the game 3-5. England became champions by defeating West Germany 4-2 in the final. It will only be fair to call Bobby Charlton the architect of England's rise to the top. When he retired after the next world cup he had set the record for highest number of appearances for England with 107 caps. Geoff Hurst became the first player to make a hat trick in the World Cup, scoring three of England's goals in the final.

This was England's only championship win in the history of the World Cup. In fact it was the first time the country had reached as far as the semifinal. West Germany's performance foreshadowed its many successes that were to come in the World Cup in the coming years. Portugal's third place after beating the Soviet Union is still its best record in the World Cup. This World Cup also set in motion a bitter rivalry between England and Argentina following violence and England's disputed goal in the quarter final.

"In the 1968 Olympics in Mexico, Hungary retained its title getting its third gold medal in Olympics football. Bulgaria, bronze medalists in 1956 won the Silver, and very surprisingly, Japan, the bronze. The participation of Europe came down to just five teams, including the 1964 champions Hungary. There were three teams each from Asia, Africa and North America (which included hosts Mexico) and two from South America.

"The 1970 World Cup in Mexico saw a comeback by two great footballing nations. Italy, champions in 1934 and 1938 and Brazil, champions

in 1958 and 1962. After its victory in the 1938 World Cup, Italy had not even reached the semifinals. Brazil had crashed out of the 1966 World Cup in the first round. Brazil's 4-1 victory over Italy in the final made them champions for the third time and permanent keepers of the Jules Rimet trophy. The match was actually a fight for the Jules Rimet Trophy. Twice champion Italy would have made it their own if they had won! A new trophy was introduced in the 1974 World Cup. West Germany came third and Uruguay fourth. Overall, the results seemed to show that the best teams were at the top.

1970 World Cup Final
Brazil vs Italy

" This was Pele's last world cup. Pele played for Brazil the last time on 18 July 1971 in an exhibition match against Yugoslavia. He hung up his boots in 1977, playing his last match of his career for New York Cosmos.

Pele's bicycle kick goal for Cosmos Club, New York against Miami Toros, 1976

He continued to serve the game as coach and administrator till his death in 2021 at the age of 82. With Pele's retirement from football in 1977 a glorious age in the history of football came to an end".

VS closed his eyes as in a trance. He seemed to have been carried away by his journey into one of the most glorious ages of football.

7

It was a Saturday. It had rained unexpectedly the previous night. There were small puddles on the walk to VS's museum. Faisal and Ramesh negotiated them carefully.

VS seemed to be taking a nap on the sofa, quite unusual in the morning. The boys wondered if they should leave quietly without waking him up. But VS opened his eyes when they had half-turned to go. It was not even a cat's nap! He would just have closed his eyes for some reverie, as he often used to do.

"Good morning, young men!" VS beamed at them.

"I think I have misled you in my own way", VS began after they had seated across him. "You are bound to think that football is all about Olympics and the FIFA Cup. I should have told you more about football clubs. I think I have said a couple of things about them, but not enough to get a fairly good idea about their role in the history of football.

"The first football club in England was Sheffield FC, set up in 1858. At least five other clubs are on record as having been set up before the establishment of the Football Association: Wanderers FC, Hallam FC, Crystal Palace FC and Notts County. Many more clubs were set up in the following years in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. By the beginning of the Twentieth Century hundreds of clubs were playing football in Europe and North and South Americas. A few clubs had sprung up in Asia and Africa too. The first clubs in India , Kumartuli, Wellington club, Town Club and National Club were set up in Kolkotta in 1885. The Calcutta Football League tournament began in 1898 and is the oldest club tournament in Asia.

"The FA Cup is still one of the most important sporting events in England. Began in 1872, this club tournament has attracted very large

crowds. Although no records are available, the FA Cup final at Wembley in 1923 is said to have drawn as many as 2, 00, 000 spectators".

"The practice of recruiting foreign players to major clubs in Europe began some time ago. The presence of foreign players have made club tournaments very exciting. Club tournaments have taken international dimensions too, with tournaments like the UEFA Champions Cup featuring club teams from various European Countries. There are similar intra-continental club tournaments in North and South Americas, Africa and Asia.

"Today major clubs in Europe and South America pay large amounts to their players, especially to talented players recruited from abroad. Often these clubs are funded by corporate companies. The club's performance is said to be good advertisement for these companies. The more famous players earn much more from advertisement. Some of them are brand ambassadors for products, projects or socio-political movements. Some of them become billionaires in a single year! Club football is also a big-money business.

VS paused with a grin.

"But one should not forget that club tournaments draw large crowds. If you take the viewers on television too the number of people who watch a

club football match would easily cross a billion. More than the FIFA Cup or the Olympics in which countries combat with one another, it is club football that has made the game popular and remunerative.

Mohan Bagan plays East Bengal
Durand Cup 2023

"And talking of club football," VS turned to them with a sly smile, "I suppose you wouldn't have missed the final at Manjeri. Too good to miss, wasn't it?"

Ramesh and Faisal stared at VS, bewildered. How did he know?

But VS did not need supernatural powers to make an educated guess that football buffs like Faisal and Ramesh would have gone all the way to Manjeri to watch the final which featured at least half a dozen African 'stars'.

Sevens match in progress

"As far as I know, there are at least fifteen major Sevens tournaments in Malabar. As you know, perhaps, Sevens is not officially recognized by

the Kerala Football Association, let alone FIFA. In fact action has been taken against some major state and national players for playing in Sevens tournaments. But they continue to be held. People arrive in large numbers, buying tickets priced moderately high to watch the matches. It is easy to prepare a smaller than normal ground for a match with seven players on each side. And you can always count on sponsors with money to spare – individuals or organizations. Which is why you find in every Sevens tournament a large number of foreign players, mostly from African countries, who add to the excitement of the matches. The Malayalam film *Sudani from Nigeria* has such a player as the lead character.

"The British writer George Orwell talked about local patriotism in games like football. You might love your city or village more fervently than you love your country. Supporters of teams from two neighbouring villages may clash with each other on or off the fields, often creating a war-like situation. We have seen that happening in Sevens tournaments. Curiously, when the FIFA Cup comes up, this rivalry becomes international. Fans of Brazil, Argentina or France clash in our villages and towns".

Nobody can beat VS at unleashing football lore, Faisal and Ramesh thought as they got up to go.

8

It was in the hospital in the city that Ramesh and Faisal met VS next. VS had contracted cellulitis. The swelling was not acute, but the red patch on the skin had gone almost up to his left knee. But VS still looked cheerful. The doctor was examining him as they entered the room.

"Hi, young men", VS raised his hand with the usual smile. "Long time, no see".

VS tried to get up from the bed, but the doctor pressed him down. He seemed to be on intimate terms with VS.

"Don't try anything like that. What you need is rest. If you start getting up and strutting around I'll have to put two attendants on guard".

"Ha, ha", VS laughed. "I thought I was pretty young. Now it appears I am not. You wouldn't mind if I have a little chat with these two young friends of mine, would you, doctor"

"All right, but don't exert yourself too much". The doctor turned to Ramesh and Faisal with a grin. "Kids, see that he doesn't do anything rash".

The doctor left the room with a wave of his hand at VS, accompanied by the nurse.

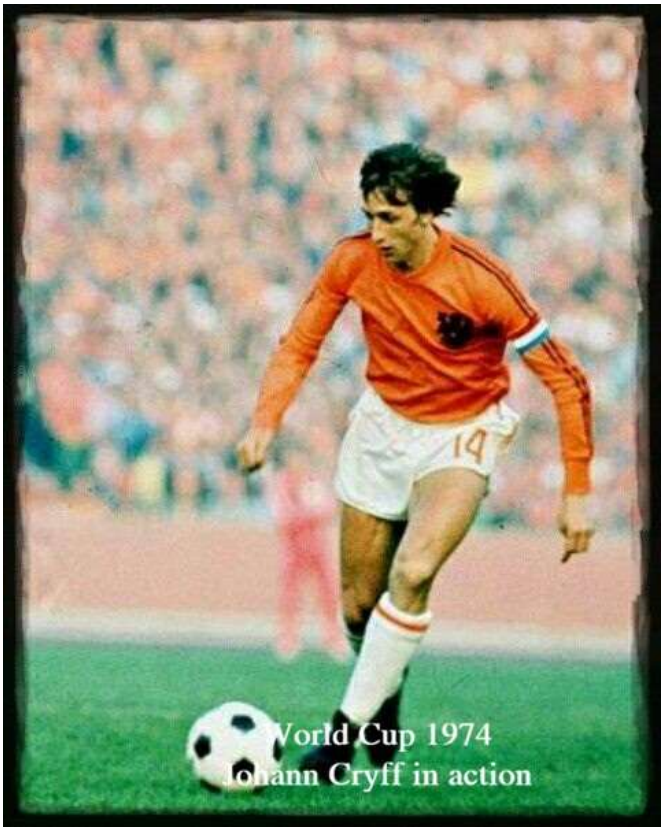
VS pointed to a bowl of grapes on the table. "Help yourself".

Ramesh and Faisal munched the sweet green grapes.

"I think we left the story at the exit of Pele from international football. That was more than half a century ago. He has passed into history. Brazil saw itself eclipsed in international football after his leaving. After becoming permanent keepers of the Jules Rimet Cup, it took Brazil 24 years to win the new FIFA cup for the first time. The end of the 1970s saw the rise of a new world power in football – Argentina. Of course, Argentina were runners up in the very first edition of the World Cup in 1930. But it was a truncated

world cup with only 13 participants. But I am jumping the gun. Four years before Argentina's rise to the top West Germany lifted the cup in 1974, winning the final 2-1 after being given a run for their money by a fighting Netherlands.

"It was Netherland's first appearance in the World Cup after a long gap of 36 years. One can say they were reinventing themselves as a soccer powerhouse after a long time, led by Johann Cryff, an early exponent of the 'total football' style devised by the Netherlands coach Rinus Michels, which the Dutch team perfected later. It is a fluid system of play in which any player (except the goalkeeper, of course!) could occupy any position on the field. It was an effective system for an attacking game which the legendary Dutch trio Van Basten, Gullit and Rijkaard proved a great success in the late 1980s and 1990s. The trio made their mark more in the UEFA European Football Championship than in the World Cup. Cryff won the Golden Ball award for the best player of the tournament.



. "On the other side Franz Beckenbauer, the architect of West Germany's success had risen to stardom. The media described him as 'football kaiser' (emperor of football) Brazil could manage only the fourth place behind Poland. One of the most interesting episodes in this world cup was East Germany's defeat of political rivals West Germany in a group match which placed it at the top of the group. This was East Germany's only appearance in a world cup final. Sixteen years later, in 1990 the Germanys were unified.

Franz Beckenbauer in action against England in World Cup 1970

"Meanwhile interesting things were happening in Olympics football. In the 1972 Olympics in West Germany all the four semifinalists were East European countries. Poland became Champions defeating three-time champions Hungary. East Germany earned the Bronze medal defeating Soviet Union in the losers' semifinal. In the 1976 Olympics held in Canada East Germany beat champions Poland to claim the gold medal for the first time. Soviet Union won the bronze defeating Brazil. In the Moscow Olympics of 1980, as in 1972, all the four semifinalists were from Eastern Europe. Czechoslovakia won the gold defeating champions East Germany. Soviet Union defeated Yugoslavia to get the Bronze medal.

"From what I have told you of the happenings in Olympic football you must have noticed that there are different sets of teams at the top in the FIFA

cup and Olympics. As I told you, till 1984 only amateur players were allowed to participate in Olympics football. Because of this rule, Eastern European socialist countries which had no professional football dominated Olympics football from 1952 to 1980, and one of them Hungary became champions three times. When professional players were allowed to take part in 1984 the change was immediately felt. France won the gold for the first time in Olympic football history. Brazil, the most successful team in the FIFA world cup got the silver. Yugoslavia , champions in 1948, 1952 and 1956 could manage only a bronze. Italy which had never entered the semifinals after winning the gold medal in 1936, took the fourth place behind Yugoslavia.

"Soviet Union won the Gold in the 1988 Olympics hosted by South Korea. This was its second Olympics title. But the next three top teams, Brazil with the Silver, West Germany with the Bronze and Italy with the fourth place were re-enacting the history of their World Cup performances.

"Argentina made history in the 1978 World Cup which it hosted by winning the title for the first time. This was Argentina's best World Cup performance after 1930. The Netherlands was second-time unlucky in a World Cup final losing 1-3 to Argentina. Brazil managed to climb up to the third place.

Mario Kempes' goal for Argentina
World Cup 1978 final

"In 1970 Italy had come close to repeating its performances in 1934 and 1938 by reaching the final. But luck came its way only in 1982 when they beat West Germany in the final. Italy thus equalled Brazil's record of three titles. Poland got the third place beating France in the losers' semifinal. This

was the first world cup in which the number of teams was raised to 24 and penalty shootout was introduced. West Germany beat France 5-4 after a penalty shootout in the semifinal. This was Deigo Maradona's first world cup. But his heroics were to come only in the next world cup. Italy's Dino Zoff, at 40, became the oldest player to win a world cup. You must have noticed that all the semifinalists were European teams. This happened in 1938 and 1966 too. But Brazil's going out in the second round had a very good reason. It was in the same group as Argentina and Italy, two of the most powerful teams ever in the world cup. Brazil put up a good fight before going down to Italy and losing a semifinal berth. Brazil had defeated Argentina in an earlier match 3-1. But only one team could go to the semifinal. Italy which had won against both Argentina and Brazil managed it easily.

"The 1986 World Cup in Mexico will be remembered by many as Deigo Maradona's world cup. Maradona was second only to Pele in fan following and media visibility. Maradona's performance was both scintillating and controversial. One of his two goals against England in the quarter final became notorious as 'hand-of-God goal'. You can guess why. But the other goal has been described as 'the goal of the century'. Maradona led his team

to lift the cup with a 3-2 win against West Germany in the final. France came third beating Belgium in the losers' semifinal".

Maradona's 'goal of the century'
World Cup 1986

Ramesh and Faisal were immersed in VS's narration. But they were not little kids any more. They remembered the doctor's warning and got up hurriedly.

"We ought to be getting along, Muthassa". Faisal shook VS's hand.

"But I haven't finished", VS protested

"Bye, Muthassa, take care", Ramesh followed Faisal to the door.

9

VS had taken to going for short walks in the morning and evening after his return from the hospital. The doctor had told him firmly that being cooped up day and night at home would be bad for him. Ramesh and Faisal met him when he had just started his stroll.

"How are you Muthassa".

"As good as I always am". VS beamed at them. "Join me?"

Faisal and Ramesh thought it a good idea. It was not dark yet. So they started walking with him, one on each side, like guardian angels.

"I think I stopped at Maradona's heroic performance in 1986", VS took up the thread. "But he wasn't through. He was back again in 1990, as energetic and wily as he was four years before. He went on to lead his team into the final. It was a repeat of the 1986 final. But West Germany was luckier this time, beating Argentina 1-0 to claim the cup. West Germany thus became the third team to win the World Cup thrice, after Brazil and Italy. Interestingly, all the four semi finalists were previous world champions: West Germany, Argentina, Italy and England. Italy beat England 2-1 for the third place. Although Maradona did not produce the fireworks of 1986 he was good enough to lead Argentina to the final.

"This world cup was memorable for a number of reasons. It marked the rise of Africa in world football. Cameroon shocked the world by defeating Argentina 2-0 in a group match. It topped the group and became the first African country to reach the quarter finals where it lost narrowly to England. Cameroon's performance in this world cup was only the beginning for African football. Teams like Senegal and Morocco were to take African football to new heights in the following world cups. Colombia showed much promise in the beginning but failed to live up to it. People like me will always remember Higuita, the eccentric Colombian goalkeeper,

who used to advance right up to the centre of the ground. It was on such a move that he conceded a goal and sent Colombia out of the world cup. Perhaps you have not read N S Madhavan's story in Malayalam "Higuita" in which Higuita is described as a by-word, not only for eccentricity, but also for daring.

Cameroon's Roger Milla scores a goal against England
World Cup 1990

Rene Higuita's scorpion kick
World Cup 1990

"Unfortunately for the spectators this world cup was also noted for boring defensive play. It still holds the record for the lowest goal average for a match: 2.21. Instead of playing an entertaining, attacking game, the teams in many matches wasted time by passing the ball aimlessly. Both semifinals ended in penalty shootouts. Argentina which played a notoriously defensive game in the final became the only country not to score in a world cup final. The ultra-defensive tactics deployed in this world cup influenced FIFA's decision two years later to bring in a rule restricting back passing.

The 1994 World Cup hosted by the USA saw Brazil lifting the trophy for a record fourth time. The final against Italy was a replay of the 1970 final. But both the teams could not live up to the spectators' expectations and the game had to be decided on a penalty shootout which Brazil won 3-2. It was the first time in the history of the World Cup that a final was decided on a penalty shootout. Champions Germany lost to unfancied Bulgaria in the quarter finals. Bulgaria went on to get fourth place losing to Sweden in the losers' semifinals. This world cup sadly saw the fall of the legendary Maradona. He was expelled from the tournament after failing a drug test. His team, runners up in 1990, crashed out of the tournament, losing to Romania in the Pre-quarter finals. A new point system was introduced in this world cup which gave three points for a win and one point for a draw".

Penalty Shootout
Brazil Vs Italy - World Cup 1994

They had reached the bridge over the stream. That was the point at which VS's walk ended. He would be walking back home while Ramesh and Faisal would cross the bridge and walk straight home.

"Bye, kids. Good night"

"Bye, Muthassa. Good night".

10

"1998 marked a turning point", VS began. He looked much healthier. His daily walks were doing him good. They were sitting in a bench in the newly opened park just across the bridge. VS had made a habit of sitting a few minutes in the park before walking back home.

"We know that France was a pioneering football nation. Football clubs had sprang up in France in the late Nineteenth Century, not long after the Football Association was established in England. Both England and France have been strong footballing nations for more than a century. But unlike Uruguay, Italy, Germany and Brazil, it took some time for them to win the World Cup. England had managed a dramatic championship win on home soil in 1966 and had taken the fourth place in 1990. France had managed a third place in 1958 and 1986 and a fourth place in 1982. But it had to wait till 1998 to lift the World Cup, like England, on home soil. Unlike any other European team, France had a good number of players from immigrant African communities. These players made France a powerful team. The most famous of them in 1998 was Zinedine Zidane who scored two of the three goals against Brazil in the final.

Zinedine Zidane in action
World Cup Final 1998

"This world cup was the first to have 32 teams participating. Seventeen of the teams were from outside Europe. Five slots each were given to Africa and South America. There were eight groups with four teams each. Two teams from each group qualified for the knockout stage. Croatia who were making their first appearance in a world cup final round after becoming an independent country sprang a surprise by getting the third position beating Netherlands 2-1 in the losers' semifinal. This world cup is also notable for the introduction of the golden goal rule. According to this rule, if the teams are level at full time, the team that scores first in extra time would be declared winners.

"The Performance of France and Croatia was the signal for more dark horses to appear on the world cup stage. In 2002 the World Cup was jointly hosted by South Korea and Japan. This was the first time that the World Cup was held in Asia. Brazil became champions for a record fifth time. The final match between Brazil and Germany was, as they say, a clash of titans in which Brazil came on top 2-0. It was their first encounter in a World Cup final. It was a return from the wilderness for Ronaldo who had missed the final match against France in 1998. He played a crucial role in taking Brazil to the top for the fifth time. Turkey occupied the third position defeating South Korea 3-2. South Korea became the first Asian team to enter the semifinal of the World Cup. Technically Turkey was in the European confederation. But geographically the major part of Turkey is in Asia. So you can say, perhaps, that two Asian teams reached the semifinals!

"Like Cameroon in 1990, Senegal turned out to be the African dark horses in this edition of the world cup. Senegal upset France in a group match 1-0 and drew with Uruguay and Denmark to reach the second round. Senegal moved to the quarter finals beating fancied Sweden, becoming the second African team, after Cameroon, to reach the quarter final. Senegal lost narrowly to Turkey in the quarter finals, but they had proven their worth. It was a bad world cup for champions France. They lost to both Senegal and Denmark in the first round and were eliminated.. This was the second and last world cup in which the golden goal rule was applied. It was scrapped for the 2006 world cup.

"Now let us see what was happening in Olympics football. In 1992 a new rule on age limit was introduced. The maximum age for players was fixed at 23. But each team was allowed to take in a maximum of three over-age players. When professional players were allowed to play in 1984 the most powerful teams who had never been able to make a mark in the Olympics before arrived with full strength. But the age restriction reversed the situation. Instead of the most powerful teams overall, teams with the best young players came on top. In the 1992 Olympics hosts Spain bagged the gold medal. Poland got the silver and Ghana the bronze. Australia followed up with a fourth place. After a fourth place in the 1950 world cup this was Spain's best performance in international football. Ghana and

Australia had never seen a semifinal before, either in the Olympics or the World Cup.

"In the Atlanta Olympics in 1996 Nigeria surprised the world by winning the gold medal in football beating Argentina 3-2. Brazil won the bronze defeating Portugal in the losers' semifinal. In the Sidney Olympics of 2000 there was another big African success. Cameroon who had shocked the world by defeating Argentina in 1990 now became Olympic champions defeating Spain in a penalty shootout after a tie. Chile won the bronze medal defeating USA 2-0. Of the four, Spain was the only country to have ever played in a world cup semifinal.

"The most surprising performance came from an Asian team in the 2004 Olympics at Athens. Iraq which did not have any standing in world football reached the semifinal. It doesn't matter that Iraq lost to Paraguay in the semifinal and to the more experienced Italy in the losers' semifinal and settled for the fourth place. What it achieved out of the blue, as they say, was wonderful. Argentina defeated Italy 3-0 to enter the final. The final between Argentina and Paraguay was the first between two South American teams after 1928. In 1928 Argentina had lost to Uruguay. But this time they

won the gold defeating Paraguay 1-0. But it was also Paraguay's best ever performance in international football."

VS stopped. It was a refreshing evening. There was a stirring breeze.

"It is quite late, kids. On your march. Let me relax for a few more minutes before going home"

"Good night, Muthassa".

"Good night".

11

The rain came quite unexpectedly with the whistling of a sudden gust. Summer rains are unpredictable. Faisal and Ramesh were returning home after playing football in the village maidan. They ran for shelter and climbed on to the roofed verandah of a provision store. Imagine their surprise when they saw VS standing, arms folded, on the verandah! Being more foresighted than them he had stepped on to the verandah before the first drops fell, as soon as the sky turned ominously dark.

"Stranded, aren't we", VS smiled at them. "But you shouldn't sing 'rain, rain, go away'. It brings such relief from the sweltering heat". The rain was thickening. Small puddles had already appeared on the uneven road.

"Just the right time for another story", VS rubbed the palms of his hands in anticipation.

"After its disappointing performance in 2002, France staged a dramatic come back in 2006. They were unlucky to lose to Italy in the final in a penalty shootout after a tie of 1-1 at the end of extra time. This was the second world cup final to be decided by a penalty shootout. Germany defeated Portugal 3-1 to claim the third place. Champions Brazil were eliminated in the quarter final, losing to France 0-1. The final match saw an unfortunate incident involving Zinedine Zidane and Italian player Marco Matterazzi. Zinedine was shown the red card for assaulting Matterazzi. But it was later revealed that he did it under provocation from Matterazzi. Zidane was chosen the player of the tournament. It was his last world cup.

"This world cup was notorious for the refereeing actions taken against players. A total of 345 yellow cards and 28 red cards were shown to players for breaking the rules of the game. Probably the competitive spirit was to blame. The teams were trying to win at any cost, by fair or foul means. What used to be called sportsman spirit seemed to be on its way out.

"The 2010 World Cup held in South Africa threw up a surprising champion: Spain. Of course, Spain had got fourth place in the 1950 world cup, but had not reached the semifinal stage in any world cup after that. It was the first world cup hosted by an African country. Spain defeated a fighting Netherlands by the only goal scored two minutes before the end of extra time. There is something interesting about Netherlands. It has never won the world cup, but has become runners-up three times and secured third and fourth place once each. Netherlands's rise to prominence was in the 1970s when it became runners up consecutively in 1974 and 1978.

The Dutch trio of total football

Ruud Gullit - Marco Van Basten - Frank Rijkaard

"Both the champions and the runners up of 2006 were eliminated in the first round. Germany won the third place and Uruguay the fourth.

Uruguay were entering the semifinal for the first time after 1970. Spain's victory against Germany in the semifinal was its first in five encounters between the two in the World Cup. It had lost twice and two matches were drawn.

"In the 2014 world cup Germany beat Argentina by a lone goal in the final to lift the trophy. It was a repeat of the finals of 1986 and 1990. Argentina was a little unlucky in Lionel Messi being out of form and in easy scoring chances being missed in the final. Yet Messi was chosen for the Golden Ball Award. One of the highlights of the semifinals was Brazil's shocking defeat to Germany 1-7. Perhaps it was Brazil's worst performance in the World Cup, that too before a home crowd. Brazil lost to Netherlands 0-3 in the losers' semifinal and had to be contented with the fourth position. What is more, Brazil conceded a record 14 goals in the tournament. It was nothing less than a nightmare world cup for Brazil.

One of Messi's left-footers
World Cup 2014 final

"In the 2018 World Cup hosted by Russia France won the title for the second time beating Croatia 4-2 in the final. Croatia's performance in the World Cup has been impressive. After becoming an independent country in 1996 Croatia qualified in all the word cups except in 2010. Its third place in the first world cup it participated in 1998 was a big achievement. Belgium beat England 2-0 in the losers' semifinal to claim the third spot. It turned out to be a humiliating world cup for Germany as it crashed out in the first round, occupying the last position in its group behind Sweden, Mexico and

South Korea. Argentina, which had nearly become champions in 2018, were knocked out at the pre-quarterfinal stage, losing to France".

"The 2022 World Cup in Qatar was remarkable for a number of reasons. It was a measure of the clout of Qatar as one of the most prosperous countries in West Asia. The arrangements were elaborate and meticulous. Argentina won the final against France in a penalty shootout after being tied 3-3 at the end of extra time. This was the third World Cup final to be decided on penalty shootouts. Two players, one on each side made their indelible marks in the tournament: Messi who became the only player to win the Golden Ball twice and M'Bappe who won the Golden Boot. But the most remarkable event in the tournament was Morocco becoming the first African country to reach the semifinal. Morocco got the fourth place losing to Croatia 1-2 in the losers' semifinal. Croatia was giving notice to the football world that it was still in the reckoning. Perhaps it would go on to win the Cup some time. Croatia had nearly done it in 2018".

The rain was thinning out, as it often did in a sudden summer outpouring. VS took a long breath. He bought a small slab of chocolate from the store, broke it into three pieces, one small and the other two larger. He handed over the larger ones to Ramesh and Faisal and started munching his piece.

"Still my favourite", VS grinned.

"What happened in Olympic football was also interesting. In the 2008 Olympics hosted by China, Argentina retained its 2004 gold medal, beating Nigeria 1-0. It was a repeat of the 1996 final which Nigeria had won. Brazil beat Belgium 3-0 to claim the bronze. The semifinal match between Argentina and Brazil was expected to be thriller, but turned out to be one-sided with Argentina winning easily with a 3-0 margin. The 2012 edition of Olympic football in UK sprang quite a few surprises. Champions Argentina did not qualify. Mexico, rank outsiders who had never reached even the semifinal in either the World Cup or in the Olympics won the gold, beating Brazil 2-1. South Korea's bronze medal and Japan's fourth place were not less surprising for football watchers. This was South Korea's best performance in the Olympics. Japan had managed to get a bronze medal on home ground in 1968.

"Brazil winning the gold and Germany the silver in the 2016 Olympics hosted by Brazil would not have surprised anybody. They have always been at the top among the creamy layer of footballing nations. Nigeria's winning the bronze medal also had nothing unusual about it. Nigeria had been having a good run in Olympic football for some time. The surprising result was Honduras coming off with a fourth place. Although Honduras lost badly to Brazil 0-6 in the semifinal, it lost by only one goal to Nigeria in the losers' semifinal. Honduras had qualified only three times for the FIFA Cup final around and were eliminated at the group stage each time. This was only Honduras' fourth appearance in the Olympics.

"The Olympics scheduled to be held in 2020 in Japan was held a year later in the shadow of the Pandemic. Brazil won the football gold, Spain the silver and Mexico the bronze. It was a lacklustre tournament played before

thin crowds. In the 2024 Olympics hosted by France Spain won the gold, Brazil the silver and Morocco the bronze".

The rain had ran out of ammunition. But the air was still sultry.

"Run off, boys. It's pretty late. I feel like taking another stroll".

VS waved to them as they walked home with hasty steps.

12

For a change Ramesh and Faisal saw an enigmatic smile on VS's face as he relaxed on the armchair.

The question was unexpected. "Have you ever watched a women's football match?"

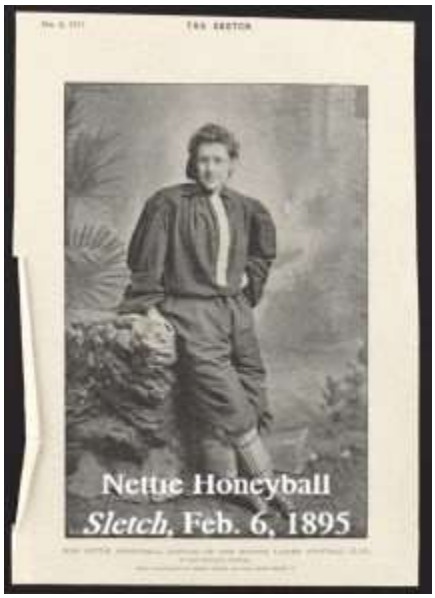
They shook their heads. They hadn't.

"The fact is that even I have watched less than half a dozen women's football matches! And some of them on TV. Quite unfair, I have to admit. In these days of women's empowerment! I am sure you wouldn't know who the FIFA Women's Football champions are. Interestingly women started playing football in England even before the Football Association was formed. But they were just amateur attempts at involving women in a game which was already gaining popularity. But the number of women attending men's matches was encouraging.

"In the city of Liege in Belgium two rich aristocrats set up what came to be called Football Club Spa. Football was an entertaining pastime for the patrons. In 1881 a woman's 'international' football match was organized in Edinburgh with tickets for entry. A crowd of 2000 attended the match. Such paid women's football matches were organized in other parts of Britain too.

"Business interests played a big role in promoting women's football in England. A business woman Nettie Honeyball set up an amateur club called British Ladies' Football Club in 1894. She organized a number of matches with other women's teams. They were well attended and provided a good business model for women's football along with men's football. In those days when women's dressing was often strictly according to social restrictions, the BLFC popularized a kind of long trousers for women players called 'split skirts', what you would today call three-fourths. The expanding

British railway network was helpful in transporting women's football teams for matches across the country punctually.



"You will be surprised to learn that women's teams versus men's teams matches were arranged during those early days of women's football. Many of them drew large crowds and were financially successful too. The Football Association tried to put its foot down on such mixed matches. The FA had never taken kindly to women's football and had on several occasions expressed its displeasure at women being involved in the game. In 1902 the FA gave an instruction to associations in the counties affiliated to it not to allow men players to play in matches with women. The FA's direction could not be implemented and the British Ladies' Football Club continued to organize such matches successfully. But the FA was waiting to strike a powerful blow.

A women's football match watched by a fairly large crowd believed to have been played sometime in the 1910s at Winslow, Birmingham

"The First World War gave a boost to women's football. The war had made women's services necessary in a number of fields and increased women's social visibility. Many women's football clubs in Britain played matches to raise funds for wounded soldiers. Some matches were played against teams made up of recovering soldiers. Two international matches were played in 1920 with an English women's team taking on a women's team from France. There was a surprising crowd of 25000 to watch one of the matches. Clearly women's football had come to stay.

"The arrival of women in football posed a threat to male football clubs. Women's matches were eating into their revenue and their plans for expansion. In 1921, under pressure from male clubs the FA requested clubs to disallow their playgrounds for use by women's teams. The FA Council which took the decision went as far as to note that football was not suitable for 'delicate female frames'! But this virtual ban on women's football could not destroy women's participation in the game although it created problems for it.

"Meanwhile women's football was becoming popular in other parts of the world too. Women were on record playing football in Chile from the early years of the Twentieth Century. And, as in Britain, women's football gained more visibility immediately before and after the First World War. France too had taken to women's football wholeheartedly. Soon women in Spain took to football too. Women's football naturally took roots in

Australia and New Zealand, two British settler colonies. You must be wondering what settler colonies are. When the British established an empire across the world, there were two kinds of colonies, settler colonies and non-settler colonies. Settler colonies were those in which the British colonizers settled in large numbers. The USA was the largest settler colony. Australia and New Zealand and Canada were other important, but less populated settler colonies. Canada and America were slower in taking to women's football.

"Women's struggle for political rights had an important role in popularizing women's football in Britain. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century women in Britain, as in other parts of the world, had no voting rights. There was an agitation by women in Britain which came to be known as the Suffragette Movement to secure voting rights for women. It was in 1928 that women finally secured voting rights. In 1921 there was an attempt to bring together all the women's football clubs in England in an organization called the English Women's Football Association. But this experiment was short-lived because of differences of opinion among its members.

"Women's football remained in the margins for more than half a century till the end of the Second World War. No international tournaments like the World Cup for men's football organized by FIFA were staged. The competitive spirit and patriotism associated with men's football was a distant dream. Club matches were organized in many countries of Europe and South America. An English women's football club Manchester Corinthians Ladies' Football Club, formed in 1949, was at the centre of these activities. In 1957 an unofficial European Women's championship was organized by at Essen in West Germany in which England became champions.

"A Women's Football Association was formed in 1969 in which forty four English clubs were members. Remember, this was more than a century after the formation of the FA! This was followed up by the formation of the International Federation of European Feminine football (FIEFF) in 1969 and its expanded version Federation of International Feminine Football (FIFF) a

year later. A Women's World Cup called Coppa del Mondo was held in Italy in the same year. Although it was called 'world cup' all teams except Mexico were European, and there were only eight teams in all. Denmark became champions beating hosts Italy 2-0 in the final. The next edition of the tournament was held in Mexico in 1971. Champions Denmark retained their title beating Mexico 3-0. These two world cups were financially successful, in spite of the low participation. Some of the matches were attended by crowds exceeding fifty thousand. Following this women's international tournaments were held at irregular intervals during the 1970s and 1980s.

"In 1988 FIFA approved the establishment of an official women's world cup. The first women's world cup was held in China in 1991 in which twelve teams participated. All the continents were represented. The USA defeated Norway 2-1 in the final to become the first champions. After this Women's world cup has been held once in every four years, one year after the men's world cup. Norway claimed the cup in the 1995 event hosted by Sweden defeating Germany 2-0 in the final. In this world cup too there were twelve teams representing all the continents.

The USA team which won the first Women's World Cup in 1991

"In 1999 when the USA hosted the tournament the number of participating countries was raised to 16. As in the previous editions all the continents were represented. The USA became champions defeating China 5-4 after a penalty shootout. The final played in California saw a turnout of ninety thousand spectators, which is a record for a women's football match. The 2003 world cup too was hosted by USA. Ninety nine countries

participated in the qualifying rounds for the fourteen slots, the winners and the hosts qualifying automatically. Germany claimed its first women's football title by beating Sweden 2-1 in the final. The hosts and champions USA had to be satisfied with the third place.

"The 2007 edition of the World Cup hosted by China saw Germany retaining its title beating Brazil 2-0 in the final. This was Brazil's best performance so far in the Women's World Cup. For a country with five men's world cup titles under its belt, this is poor consolation. USA held on to its third position beating Norway in the playoff. The 2011 edition hosted by Germany threw up a surprising winner – Japan. Japan beat USA 5-3 after a penalty shootout to grab the title.

"In 2015 Canada became the first nation in North America to host the women's world cup. The number of teams for the final round was raised to 24. 134 teams competed in the pre-qualifying rounds. The 2011 results were reversed with the USA beating Japan 5-2 in the final. The 2019 world cup was hosted by France, which like England was a pioneering country in women's football. USA beat Netherlands 2-0 to claim its fourth title. The matches were widely telecast and an audience of more than one billion is estimated to have watched them.

"In 2023, for the first time in the tournament's history, the World Cup was jointly hosted by Australia and New Zealand. The number of participating teams was raised to 32, at par with the number for the men's World Cup. Spain beat England 1-0 in the final to become champions. The world now looks forward eagerly to the 2027 World Cup to be hosted by Brazil. Will it mark a turning point in the in the legendary footballing nation's women's football history? We shall see.

Chile Vs Denmark
Women's World Cup 2023

"History seems to have proven FA's dictum wrong: football can be played by women too, as entertainingly and as expertly as men. The increasing crowds in the venues and the rising patronage in the media show that women's football is a big financial success too.

"Closer home we have the South Asian Football Federation (SAAF) Women's Football Tournament. It began in 2010. The seven SAARC members, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives are the members of SAFF. India became champions five times and Bangladesh twice, the last time in 2024 when the tournament was held in Kathmandu.

VS stopped and took a deep breath.

"Certainly much remains to be said and written about women's football. Perhaps one of you might do it."

Ramesh and Faisal said nothing. But they thought it a good idea.

13

It was an unusually hot day. Or, rather, one of the many hot days that came one after the other in a row. Playing football in the hot sun was risky. But Ramesh and Faisal could not think of a day without football. They had to start as soon as there was enough light early in the morning and come off the field when the sun came out from behind the trees.

As they walked back home they felt the sweat on their bodies drying up. Humidity was high. They would get nearly a glass-full of sweat if they wrung their jerseys as they came off the field! As they crossed the bridge they were surprised by VS who, like them was eager to be home before the sun beat down on him.

"Hi kids!" VS beamed at them. "Perseverance is the word, right? Hot or cold, the game has to go on. You have ages and ages before you. I don't know how many more summers of this kind I will see".

They fell into step with VS.

"Ever heard of a country called Cabo Verde? Or one called Curacao?"

Ramesh and Faisal stared at VS puzzled. They didn't have a clue as to what he was talking about.

"Got you there!" VS laughed. "Well, I'll break the news. They are two small countries which have qualified for the World Cup 2026. The first lies off the coast of West Africa and the second just a stone's throw away, one may say, from the coast of Venezuela in South America. Cabo Verde is only less than one-tenth of Kerala in size. Curacao is only about one-sixth the size of Kozhikode district. Both countries have qualified for the world cup for the first time. But they are not the only first-time qualifiers. Jordan and Uzbekistan are playing in the finals for the first time.

"But there are more interesting things about this edition of the world cup than the record number of newly qualified teams. For the first time in

the history of the World Cup there are three hosts: USA, Canada and Mexico. The number of qualifying teams is a staggering 48, up from 32 in 2022. The qualifying format was also complicated. The hosts qualified automatically. But the winners did not qualify automatically as they used to. Argentina had to go through the qualifying matches to reach the final round. Each confederation was given a certain number of slots. But there were two slots which were filled by inter-confederation play-offs between teams which were placed just below the teams which qualified from each confederation. In the final line-up Europe has, looking at the history of the tournament, a proportionately fewer number of qualifying teams: just 16. Africa is sending a surprisingly large contingent of ten teams. Asia and Oceania together have also managed to get ten slots and South America six. The North-Central American-Caribbean representation is also not bad: six including the three hosts. The biggest disappointment is the absence of four-time champions Italy, who failed to qualify from the European Confederation.

"The format for the matches has also been changed to accommodate the large number of teams. There are twelve groups with four teams each. After the round robin matches in each group, two of the best teams in each group, together with eight other best performing teams from across the groups will enter the knockout stage. Thirty two teams will then fight for the top slots. Each match will send one team to the next round and eliminate the other.

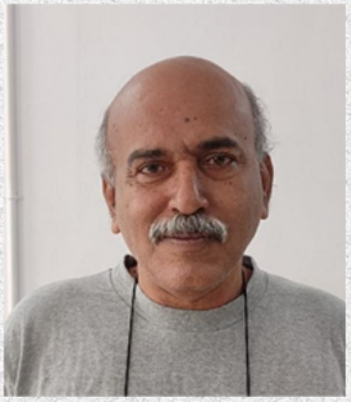
"Meanwhile here is a sobering thought. FIFA has 211 members and 11 associated members But in the Ninety two years' history of the World Cup only 8 countries have reached the top– Uruguay, Italy, Germany, Brazil, England, Argentina, France and Spain. What is more, Italy, Germany, Brazil, Argentina and France have together became runners up ten times (Germany four times and the other countries twice each). It would seem there are monopolies in games as there are in business! This will be Messi's sixth and, in all probability, last World Cup. It will be a record he will share with Cristiano Ronaldo. Mbappe is around too, along with many other players who were in Qatar. We are definitely going to see some great action.

"It will be a great gala event, of course. There will be 104 matches in all played at 16 host cities in three countries with varying weather conditions. The Canadian cities will be the coolest. Toronto usually has a maximum day temperature of 22°C - 25°C and Vancouver 19°C - 24°C. American cities are hotter. Day temperatures in host cities like Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and Miami can go up to 35°C in June-July, much like our Kerala in late March and early April. A little less uncomfortable, of course. Their levels of humidity are much lower than ours. Mexican cities are even hotter. In the capital Mexico City the highest day temperature may hover between 25°C and 30°C. But in Guadalajara and Monterrey day temperatures may easily go beyond 35°C".

A far-away look came into VS's eyes.

"Weather-hopping was one of my favourite pastimes in my younger days. Freezing in Edmonton, roasted alive in Cairo, sunbathing in Miami, looking like a clown in a thick coat and peaked cap in Moscow's winter. I have been to four World Cups. No more World Cups for me. I have had my quota".

Ramesh and Faisal could hear VS's sigh. They sighed too.



VS and His Soccer Ramblings

K M Sherrif

A thumbnail history of
World Football
As told to two young buffs

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